

A Report of the Graduation
Rate Outcomes Study



Student Success

in State Colleges
and Universities

A Matter of Culture
and Leadership

aascu

American Association of State
Colleges and Universities

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Preface

“Preventing students from dropping out,” as Alexander Astin titled one of the first major works on the subject some three decades ago (Astin 1975), has been a preoccupation of American colleges and universities for some time now. It is also a topic that is especially bound up with the history—as well as the many operational dilemmas—of the nation’s state colleges and universities. Most American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ (AASCU) institutions can date their original founding as normal schools to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. But today’s incarnation emerged with the great expansion (the Europeans would now call it “massification”) of American higher education in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This significant increase in enrollment was founded on new kinds of students. They were typically drawn from the lower middle class, their parents had only rarely gone to college, and they were usually in the top half (instead of the top tenth) of their high school graduating classes. The early literature on student retention (e.g. Tinto 1975; Beal and Noel 1980; and Lenning, Beal, and Sauer 1980) was not necessarily directed specifically at these new institutions. Indeed, most of it, like the majority of published work on the learning, behavior, and development of college students during that period, was rooted

in residential campuses enrolling what we now call “traditional” students. But even under the best of conditions, institutions faced considerable challenges getting students to complete their programs. Based on historical research, for example, Vincent Tinto (1982) was able to point out that graduation rates at American colleges and universities had remained essentially flat for a century, despite major changes in the structure of higher education and in the characteristics of the students who attended them over this period.

But the “dropout” phenomenon had enormous and particular implications for AASCU institutions. While “massification” allowed elite colleges and universities to become ever more selective to maintain enrollments, the “people’s universities”

The stories told about these twelve colleges and universities underscore the diversity of successful approaches to retaining and graduating students.

were bound by mission and demographics to a student population that was increasingly challenged by the college experience. And this condition was only accelerated by the demographic shifts of the 1980s and 1990s that saw student populations at AASCU institutions increase markedly in diversity

with respect to race/ethnicity, age, and social class.

The AASCU Graduation Rate Outcomes Study thus rests on a long tradition of inquiry into a phenomenon that is vital to the missions of state colleges and universities. Given this long tradition, it is no surprise that its findings, for the most part, mirror insights about the correlates of student success that others have found¹. But the consistency of these findings with other work and, more significantly, the fact that they were observed by practitioners—faculty, administrators, student affairs professionals, and institutional researchers at AASCU institutions whose day-to-day functions are not immersed in the scholarship of higher education—lends them, perhaps, a different kind of credibility. Anyone reading the reports of the twelve visiting teams cannot help but pick up the observers’ sense of sincere and admiring enthusiasm. In part, they were impressed by what they saw because it so often contrasted with what they had become accustomed to on their own campuses. In part, it was because it corresponded equally often to the kinds of campus environments they envisioned for their own campuses. The spirit of benchmarking that underlies improvement in any field involves a careful balance between systematic long-term scholarship to uncover good practice, and getting practitioners themselves “out there” to actually look directly at what this means. The AASCU Graduation Rate Outcomes Study remains above all an action project, and its effectiveness will be judged less by

the particular findings reported here than by the ongoing spirit of inquiry and self-analysis that the project provokes among AASCU members.

The stories told about these twelve colleges and universities underscore the diversity of successful approaches to retaining and graduating students. Good performance here is not just the province of small, selective institutions. With nurturing and care, it can be achieved at any AASCU campus. But these stories also suggest that simply finding “best practice” somewhere and “plugging it in” is unlikely to be effective. To illustrate, I recall vividly a board chairman of a state university system—who happened to be the CEO of a large aerospace enterprise—commissioning a study to gather and incorporate the “all the best features” of other state university systems with respect to a particular facet of performance. Some of us present needed to remind him how, as an aerospace design engineer, he would probably react to a team at his own company returning from such a quest with a set of well-crafted aircraft components “all of which came from a (different) airplane that flew.” What this report (and its many counterparts) makes clear is that coherence, intentionality, planned redundancy, and a dedicated and competent crew—knit together in unique but comprehensible ways—are what underlies lasting success.

—Peter Ewell
National Center for Higher
Education Management Systems

Background

The AASCU Graduation Rate Outcomes Study was an initiative aimed at understanding the reasons why some state-supported four-year colleges and universities do an unusually good job in retaining and graduating students. The project was stimulated by a growing recognition, motivated by increasing public disclosure of institutional graduation rates and their prominent use as accountability measures, that apparently similar institutions often performed quite differently with respect to the success of their students. By examining selected campuses and documenting what they found, study participants hoped to gain a better understanding of why these institutions were successful, and what other campus leaders could do to achieve high performance.

AASCU, EdTrust and NASH have a common commitment to access and student success in higher education. Recently they found themselves sharing a specific concern about graduation rates as the U.S. Congress, along with many states, began to focus on graduation rates as measures of institutional effectiveness. A historic problem with using graduation rates as measures of institutional effectiveness has always involved inappropriate comparisons between institutions with different missions and different student characteristics. To help address this problem, EdTrust completed work in fall 2004 on a web tool that allows a sophisticated but easy-to-use interface to access the graduation

rate data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics². Although this web-based tool offers substantially better comparisons, the ability to make better comparisons did not tell institutional leaders what policies and practices they should undertake to improve graduation rates on their

Study Sponsors

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)—members work to extend higher education to all citizens including those who have been traditionally underrepresented on college campuses. By delivering America's promise, these institutions fulfill the expectations of a public university by working for the public good through education and engagement. AASCU represents more than 430 public colleges, universities and systems of public higher education throughout the United States and its territories. Its members enroll more than three million students or 55 percent of the enrollment at all public four-year institutions

The Education Trust (EdTrust)—an independent nonprofit organization that works for high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college, and toward forever closing the achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth. The basic tenet of the Education Trust is that all children will learn at high levels when they are taught to high levels.

National Association of System Heads (NASH)—a membership organization of chief executive officers of the 52 public higher education systems in 38 states and Puerto Rico. About 70 percent of all four-year college undergraduates attend school in the member systems. The goal of the association is to improve the governance of public higher education systems.

own campuses. So AASCU, EdTrust and NASH agreed to create a partnership to examine graduation rate outcomes more fully, aimed at identifying why some institutions report much higher success rates than similarly situated institutions and to use this knowledge to provide guidance to campus leaders about how to improve their own graduation outcomes. The key idea animating this collaborative project was to help campuses manage, instead of just reacting to, growing external concerns about graduation rates.

Using data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics and the EdTrust web interface, the three partner associations identified twelve AASCU institutions that were doing better than their peers in graduating students within six years. Six of the twelve institutions had maintained high graduation rates for a long period of time; the other six had shown substantial improvements in their graduation rates since 1996. The twelve participating institutions also were chosen to represent the

range of AASCU institutions, using the Carnegie Classification and Barron's Admissions Selector Rating categories. They included Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). All twelve institutions that were identified agreed to participate as study campuses.

The primary work of the project was accomplished by eight-person study teams who visited each campus for two days in the spring of 2005 (see Appendix B). Study team leaders and members were drawn from a national pool of individuals nominated by their institution's chief executive or chief academic officer. Study team leaders developed the report processes and protocols used in this study. Each study team leader led one visiting team. All nominations included a commitment to pay for the team member's travel expenses for the study visit as well as time to do the work of the study. Study teams were constituted to ensure that members of each team reflected leadership, research, academic, enrollment management, and admissions experience. Ninety-seven team members from 94 different institutions participated in the study visits. This does not count the multitude of people at the twelve study campuses who met with and supported the study teams during their visits.

In addition, each institution that contributed a visiting team member agreed to conduct a self-study of its own using the protocols developed for examining the study campuses. These self-studies were reviewed to provide background information about public higher education practices thought to affect graduation rate outcomes to compare to what was found at study campuses. In addition, a commission comprised of eight system heads and campus presidents and chancellors was established.

Study Campuses

- California State University Stanislaus
- Clemson University, South Carolina
- City University of New York,
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
- Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina
- Louisiana Tech University
- Montclair State University, New Jersey
- Murray State University, Kentucky
- Northwest Missouri State University
- Truman State University, Missouri
- University of Northern Iowa
- University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
- Virginia State University

Their responsibility was to provide advice and direction to the project staff. Members of the commission provided direction to the project staff and campus study teams, accepted the site visit reports, and recommended the final report to the sponsoring associations.

In December 2004, the study team leaders met with project staff and consultants in Washington, D.C. to develop a study approach designed to focus on issues such as institutional intentionality, integration of effort, intervention with students, information

driven processes, leadership, and campus culture. The study approach was shared with each study campus to help them prepare for the visit.

Study campus visits were conducted over a two-week period in March 2005. Each study team prepared a report of the site visit in a template developed for the project. The visiting team reports were reviewed by the project staff and consultants, in partnership with association staff and the visiting team leaders. This report is the result of that collaboration.

Findings

While study campuses were all successful in retaining and graduating students, they were remarkably diverse in other ways. Ranging from large to small, urban to rural, and specialized mission to general purpose, they exhibited an extraordinary variety of specific strategies to promote student success. Most of these specific strategies are consistent with proven “best practice” as documented in literature on retention that goes back thirty years. Because they are well known, many of these specific strategies are undoubtedly in place at campuses we did not visit and whose success rates are modest. Indeed, 96 percent of the institutions submitting self-studies for the project reported a “first year program” in place—a feature shared by all of the study campuses. What is more distinctive about study institutions is the overall campus culture within which these practices are deployed and the quality of presidential and administrative leadership that keep them moving and coordinated.

An Initial Irony

One striking way to emphasize the importance of culture and leadership in the success reported for many study institutions is to note how frequently they did not perceive their exceptional performance as a product of a “student retention” effort at all. The following excerpts from visiting team reports were typical:

Elizabeth City State University has not had a highly specific emphasis on graduation rates *per se*. Rather the campus commitment is to supporting and nurturing students . . . high graduation rates seem to be not a direct focus but a byproduct of their real concern.

The focus on improving the general environment, students, and student learning has been the means to reach the campus’ goals rather than a direct focus on retention and graduation . . . the focus on students and high quality learning environment were key ingredients in the transformation of the campus (Truman State University).

The relationships cultivated between faculty and students are among the most highly valued, yet it is not clear that this feature was created by design . . . the university evolved over time from a smaller homogeneous institution to a larger heterogeneous organization with a complex mission (Clemson University).

[Faculty and staff] were unaware of the level of success achieved by the institution . . . most conceptualized their efforts as more globally focused on student success rather than specifically on retention and graduation rates (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice).

Faculty and staff stated that they were not aware that their graduation and retention rates were unusually high . . . there is an element of pride in the quality of programs that lead to student success rather than a focus on retention and graduation (University of Northern Iowa).

Indeed, as the last two excerpts note, faculty and staff at study institutions were frequently not aware that they were unusual in their success. They simply had tried to create a campus attitude and climate that was consistently focused on meeting student needs and helping students succeed. As the Truman State University team report succinctly puts it, “the primary focus is on improving the student learning environment and if this is achieved, graduation and retention will follow.”

This is not to say that the success of these campuses in retaining students is accidental. Montclair State University explicitly included improving graduation and persistence rates as goals in its institutional plan and while the University of Northern Iowa plan does not specifically mention student retention and graduation as a goal, the visiting team noted that “it is clear that the plan is the foundation of the institution’s success, and [graduation and retention rates] are included in it as performance indicators.”

Going farther, several visiting teams seemed a bit puzzled about how some institutions remained ignorant of their success and the reasons for it and saw this as a potential long-term difficulty. As one report cautioned, “[staff at the institution] admitted that they did not plan intentionally for retention and graduation improvements, and are not quite sure why or how these improvements occurred.” But what seems consistent across all accounts—and that this characteristic “initial irony” illustrates—is

that student success at these institutions is more a product of an overarching shared culture than it is the result of a more narrowly-conceived, deliberate “retention effort.”

Unpacking Culture

What are some of the specific elements of culture underlying this last observation? While they are intertwined in many ways, at least three key elements of culture can be distinguished and discussed. The first is the pervasive attitude that all students can succeed, reinforced by a wider culture that is not content to rest on past success. The second is a sense of inclusiveness on the part of all members of the campus community frequently characterized as a “family.” And a third, somewhat more consciously crafted element of culture, is a strongly held sense of institutional mission that recognizes the campus as “distinctive” or “special.”

- **High Expectations**—Though infrequently admitted, a prevailing value structure among faculty and staff at most colleges and universities is that student success is up to students. Reinforcing this belief—especially among many AASCU institutions—can be the frequently expressed desire to improve “quality” (and concomitantly, retention) by becoming more selective. And there is truth to both of these, in part. Six of the study institutions had recently raised their admissions requirements—surely a factor in their success. But the other six had not changed admissions practices appreciably and still enjoyed high graduation rates. Furthermore, many of them stress the need for students, within a proper scaffolding of service and support, to take active responsibility for their own success. But what really distinguishes many of these campuses is the pervasive belief that

demography is not destiny: all of the students they admit have the potential to graduate, and they should all be held to high levels of expectation². The following excerpts from visiting team reports are typical:

The campus has created a culture that expects students to succeed and that supports them along the way . . . for example, one of the first images students see upon entering the admissions office is a large picture of graduation exercises (Murray State University).

Although faculty and staff are very nurturing, they also emphasized student responsibility for solving their own problems . . . [faculty and staff] characterized their approach as a scaffolding approach where students were gradually given more responsibilities as their academic careers progressed (Elizabeth City State University).

Overarching commitment to students seems to be a type of [almost “parental” commitment] to students that includes rigorous academic programs (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice).

In many cases, visiting team comments emphasized the fact that despite a non-selective student body, faculty held students to high standards. At Virginia State University, for example, students report they are experiencing higher expectations and faculty receive explicit messages from the president that they are to teach at higher levels and increase their expectations for students. The example of

concrete images of success evoked by the Murray State University quote above was echoed at other campuses. In the courtyard of the student center at Louisiana Tech University there is a “brickwalk” comprising named bricks for each individual graduate, grouped by class; one student was heard to exclaim, “she wanted to get her brick.” The Freshman Reading Experience at Murray State University intentionally features works by authors who have achieved success despite overwhelming odds, communicating to students from the outset that they too can persevere and succeed. The “Covenant,” signed by each incoming student at Northwest Missouri State University containing specific promises that they promise to live up to about how they will engage college-level work is also founded on high expectations.

But establishing high expectations are only one pole of a culture that simultaneously stresses the institution’s obligation to help students meet these expectations. The notion of “scaffolding” noted in the Elizabeth City State University visiting team report is an example of the institution’s obligation and a common finding in the wider research literature on student success. Beyond individual intervention programs, many campuses exhibited a “360” attitude of support for student success in which faculty and staff were proactive in reaching out to students to determine, then respond to, their individual problems. At Louisiana Tech University, the visiting team noted that no student was made to wait anywhere at a service office without being approached by staff. Individual recognition and response was also noted as important. At Elizabeth City State University, the visiting team reported that faculty were very familiar with the individual backgrounds of their students and all knew their

²This observation is consistent with much previous work on the topic of student success. See Astin (1977), NIE (1984), Chickering and Gamson (1987), and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2004).

students personally and by name. As the report put it, “faculty members treat students as they would want someone to treat their own children—greeting them with a smile, being honest with them, and ‘kicking butts’ when needed.” At Murray State University, the team noted, both faculty and staff recognize that retention happens “one student at a time.” Finally, the visiting team described the unusual commitment of faculty to student success at Montclair State University as follows:

The first camp is represented by faculty who believe that they have a role in retention and the second is represented by faculty who don’t understand their role in retention . . . the team noted that there was no third camp, those who did not believe they had a role in retention . . . this is significant . . . faculty do not let things “fall through the cracks for students”.

Genuine and demonstrated faculty commitment to help students succeed is a striking characteristic in many of these reports. Indeed, several of them note that such attitudes are typical on most campuses for student affairs professionals—though often less so for service office workers. What was universally striking at study institutions, though, was the unusual degree to which faculty expressed and acted on these convictions. This kind of faculty commitment may be especially important for AACSC institutions where many students are commuters and faculty contact in the classroom may be the only “human face” of the institution students typically see.

A third element of high expectations shared by many study institutions is that the culture demands performance from the institution and its members, not just from students. Many visiting teams reported

elements of culture that the quality management guru W. Edwards Deming emphasized in point five of his famous fourteen points, “improve constantly and forever the system of production and service.” And it is explicit in the “quality culture” created by Northwestern State University (Ill.) who has fully adopted Deming’s principles—a pervasive uneasiness about being content with current performance and the conviction that the institution can always do better³.

Among study institutions, this quality was frequently associated with presidential leadership. The following excerpts from team reports are typical:

Tech is not content to rest on the laurels of the success it has already had . . . rather it seeks intentional ways to make further gains and to sustain the gains that it has already made (Louisiana Tech University).

Faculty, staff, and administrators are constantly asking “what can we do to move to the next level?” (Murray State University).

The president is quite intolerant of substandard goals and consequently pushes the VSU community to be the very best at everything (Virginia State University).

The president often heard saying “we can get better” . . . “while [graduation rate] compares very well with the average for our peer group, is that all that WE can hope to attain?” (Montclair State University).

³This characteristic is especially prominent in the high-performing campuses observed by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005), who termed it “positive restlessness” (p. 146). See also Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005), a Change article revealingly entitled “Never Let It Rest.”

These excerpts also suggest an unusual perception of self-efficacy and confidence that high levels of performance can be achieved. As one visiting team member put it, “a constant willingness to experiment and the conviction that ‘we can do it,’ together create a spirit of healthy restlessness on the campuses that we visited.”

To summarize, a culture of high expectations is also a culture of mutual expectations. Study campuses do not just hold students to high standards. They also do everything in their power to provide them with the support they need to succeed and to build students’ sense of personal responsibility for their achievement. Leaders do not just set high targets for faculty and staff performance. As will be seen later, they set targets that actually can be met, provide support and example to meet them, then raise the bar another notch. A culture that succeeds like this is always in dynamic balance. It leads with high expectations as the sine qua non of the institution’s mission. But, as the second cultural element described below suggests, it simultaneously emphasizes inclusion.

- **Belonging**—One of the most frequently mentioned success factors for selective small liberal arts colleges in the literature on student retention is that their students are consistently involved in a close and mutually-reinforcing network of campus ties that include residence life, frequent student-faculty contact and a rich range of extracurricular activities⁴. AASCU institutions—by definition, larger and less well funded—have a hard time duplicating these idyllic conditions. But study

⁴The development of such networks of inclusion has been a major theme of the retention literature for three decades; see Astin (1975, 1977); Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates (1985); Tinto, (1993); and Kuh, Shuh, Whitt and Associates (1991).

institutions, in spite of these challenges, found many ways to build a similar sense of engagement. One of its most pervasive metaphors is that of “family,” as the following excerpts from visiting team reports attest:

There is an overall emphasis of encouragement of students by faculty, staff, and administration to be involved in the campus community in some way . . . many used the term “family” to describe the desired perception (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse).

Throughout the visit, language used by professional staff, faculty, and students to describe their efforts were “family,” “team-oriented,” “caring,” “community-focused,” “student-centered,” “collaborative,” and “intentional.” Language used by staff to describe the student body over the years was “traditional,” “family-oriented,” “team-oriented,” and “caring.” (Montclair State University)

The “Tech Family” . . . It is also referred to as a “culture of caring” (Louisiana Tech University).

Students are “honored and respected” in this relationship . . . students are central in the “Clemson Family” or the “Clemson Experience” are terms the team heard a lot during the visit . . . reports of close, long-term relationships between faculty and students that extended beyond graduation were common . . . retired faculty remain “family members” (Clemson University).

Faculty and staff often voiced the belief that Northwest is a “family” in which mutual respect and concern are the norm . . .

although one might hear similar comments on many campuses, it is evident [to us] that the family metaphor truly is central for Northwest employees (Northwest Missouri State University).

Part of treating students as members of a “family” involves unusual faculty and staff efforts directed toward getting to know them personally and toward making them feel physically and emotionally welcome. It also involves trying to determine their own aspirations and goals for attending college—seeing the college through student eyes⁵. Though the visits were short, many visiting team members were impressed by the frequency with which they observed “welcoming” behavior. At Louisiana Tech University the visiting team observed many informal conversations between students and faculty in which the latter went out of their way to exchange greetings and solicit information about how things were going—despite the fact that it was raining. At the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice the visiting team reported that faculty members were unusually empathetic to the challenges their students face as first-generation college students.

Another part of creating a “family feeling” is to employ the familiar rituals of family. At Elizabeth City State University, the student affairs staff makes sure to send every student a birthday card. At California State University Stanislaus, the President initiated an annual “feed the students” day during which faculty members cook for students and a similar event was reported by the team visiting the University of Northern Iowa. Northwest Missouri

State University incorporates inclusion in a different way—through the substantial use of student employees. As the visiting team reports:

All front-line positions and many—if not most—positions usually filled in colleges and universities by full-time classified staff and professionals at staff and middle management levels are filled and executed by part-time student employees . . . over 900 students (one in seven) are employed . . . paid from regular salary funds . . . in many ways Northwest is their university and they run it.

A strong foundation for building such an inclusive culture is continuity. It is not unusual for study campuses to recruit both students and staff who have some prior connection with the institution. Reinforcing this, staff turnover at all levels appears unusually low. At Elizabeth City State University almost 30 percent of those employed by the University are alumni and the visiting team talked to several individuals who had a spouse, a child, or a parent also working at the institution. And at a very different kind of institution—Clemson University—the fact that 35-40 percent of students each year are “legacies” whose parents also attended builds especially strong ties. In some cases, prior history and longevity extends to the very top. At the University of Northern Iowa, the president is a graduate of the university and a recent, long-term president at Truman State University was a graduate (married to a fellow graduate as well). The following excerpts from visiting team reports convey the power of continuity in building a sense of commitment:

Another important characteristic . . . is the extent to which the University has “hired its own” . . . many staff, including unit directors are

⁵The critical importance of this shift of perspective from that of the institution to that of the student is perhaps emphasized best in Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates (1985), pp. 450-5.

first generation graduates of the institution (California State University Stanislaus).

It is not difficult to find faculty and staff members who have worked at the institution for a significant period of time or who have attended the university prior to joining the institution (University of Northern Iowa).

One long-term administrator who was also an alumnus of the campus indicated that his motivation for helping students was to do for them “what was done for me” in the 1960s (Elizabeth City State University).

Many of the top campus administrators are alumni of the institution . . . while the downside is to shut off new ideas, the [resulting] passion and dedication more than outweighs this (Louisiana Tech University).

While it can be argued that continuity and prior identification with an institution are things that “just happen” without being deliberately fostered, it seems clear that once such a positive culture is established it must also take active steps to perpetuate itself. At Truman State University, there is a long tradition of faculty recruitment that emphasizes direct faculty experience with a liberal arts environment. Like any university, Truman seeks new faculty from the best possible graduate programs, but it looks especially for candidates who attended small liberal arts colleges as undergraduates. Truman also takes particular care to orient new faculty into the “liberal arts and sciences culture” that the institution seeks to foster. Similarly the visiting team noted that at Montclair State University a special emphasis is placed on sending the message to potential new hires that they are expected to “become part of a broader family whose mission is student success.” And this

message is not just stated once but is the centerpiece of a semester-long orientation program for new faculty.

The result of all this, as several visiting teams noted, was to effectively transplant some of the most visible hallmarks of the residential private liberal arts college experience to the seemingly less fertile ground of the AASCU commuter institution. At City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the visiting team observed “there is a profound sense of community at the college, which is surprising in that it is a non-residential community in the midst of a major city with a very diverse student body, faculty, and staff.” Their counterparts visiting California State University Stanislaus similarly noted that this commuter university is essentially “a residential campus in terms of [the attitudes and commitments of] faculty and staff.”

- **Purpose and Place**—While “mission” is surely important at state colleges and universities, there has always been a tendency for its structural and governance aspects (as in “mission, role, and scope”) to trump its values dimension. In contrast, visiting teams frequently reported that the institution’s “mission” was seen less as a written document than as a shared belief system and a code of conduct embraced by faculty and staff⁶. Central to both is a sense of purpose focused on fostering student learning. This sense of shared purpose, in turn, helps reinforce a culture that is comfortable with the mission of serving current students, rather than aspiring toward “higher”

⁶For elaboration on the importance of shared purpose and “living mission” in improving student success, see Kuh, Shuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) and Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh, Whitt and Associates (2005, chapter 2).

levels of institutional prestige by becoming more selective. This is especially salient to AACSCU institutions that the public expects to serve the students it has.

The following excerpts from visiting team reports give some flavor to this unusual sense of purpose:

A strong sense of mission and place shared by upper administration, staff at all levels, and students is the most important element in [achieving high] graduation outcomes (California State University Stanislaus).

The institution's motto is "Students First" . . . so strong is the commitment to this motto that it has taken on mantra-like dimensions, being one of the first things everybody mentions . . . it is not just something faculty and staff are told to do but they are hired with this attribute in mind and supported and rewarded for demonstrating their commitment to the concept (University of Northern Iowa).

[At a campus whose purpose is thoroughly inculcated with the principles of Continuous Quality Improvement] Virtually everyone we spoke with used the language of quality improvement (e.g. "root cause analysis," "seven step planning") . . . posters identifying the university's "decision drivers," vision and mission," and "cultural core values" are widely evidenced in campus buildings (Northwest Missouri State University).

Faculty universally talked about having ownership of student success . . . one administrator commented that they "are all quasi-counselors" . . . none of the faculty [we interviewed] talked

about this extra workload as a burden (Elizabeth City State University).

As noted earlier, much of this shared sense of purpose is reinforced consciously through the recruitment process. At Elizabeth City State University, the institution's focus on student success is made clear in the faculty interview process and the culture is consciously maintained by only hiring faculty and staff who buy into the philosophy of student-centeredness. Adjunct faculty members also are made a part of this process. At Truman State University, the university provides an extensive new faculty orientation program to help new hires understand core values about high standards and the centrality of undergraduate teaching and learning, so they can affirm the institution's underlying philosophy and goals. The team visiting the University of Northern Iowa similarly noted with favor that new faculty members are "mentored" and coached in classes by retired faculty associated with the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching. Other study teams emphasized that effort to deliberately recruit the right kinds of people and socialize new members into the community helped maintain core purposes, even as institutions grew beyond the point where this kind of culture is "natural."

Cultures of student success also are fostered deliberately through consistent actions and visible allocations of scarce resources. At Montclair State University, the visiting team was impressed with the sheer number of staff dedicated to providing advisement and student support services. They went on to note the growing pervasiveness of this shared sense of purpose, observing that "until recently, housing and food services were not considered important complements to the mission of the

university . . . this is turning around . . . bringing new programs into the halls.” As Montclair’s President summarized, “we’re consistent in what we’re saying and what we’re doing.”

The net result of this shared sense of purpose is a “mission” that is more than just a ritualized piece of prose that opens the college catalog. Formalized planning is an outgrowth of culture and day-to-day experience, not a bureaucratic process layered on top of it. As the visiting team observed about the University of Northern Iowa, “the Strategic Plan is constantly reviewed, embodying the culture, values, vision, mission . . . [and] discussions [at all levels] consistently indicate the plan is the fount from which all else flows at the university.”

Unpacking Leadership

“Leadership” is a topic that has assumed mythic proportions in higher education, just as it has in the corporate world. One typical construction of it centers on charisma and heroic personal qualities that make presidents capable of visibly inspiring and actively shaping large-scale institutional transformations. And to be sure, presidents at study campuses were reported as showing many of these characteristics. But what tended to set leadership apart for visiting teams at these institutions were two qualities that were less spectacular, but perhaps more effective. First, “leadership” is a shared responsibility—occurring at all levels and deeply embedded in the way the institution works as an organization on a day-to-day basis. Second, the particular presidential qualities needed to build and sustain the culture and organizational processes observed at study campuses are more about listening than talking, and more about consistent personal

modeling of a particular collective vision than about spectacular public performances.

- **No Silos**—“Flattened organizations” and “matrix organizations” have become buzzwords in organizational literature these days and their effects carry over into higher education. The argument here essentially is that the most effective organizational structures are as much lateral as they are hierarchical and emphasize the flexibility and “on-the-ground” effectiveness that can be gained when work teams drawn from different places (and reporting lines) are able to work together on a problem. Another dimension of this argument is directly about leadership and authority: in order to work properly, individuals far down what would otherwise be seen as the “chain of command” should be given as much authority as possible to make critical decisions without asking permission. This, in turn, requires an accountability structure that encourages risk-taking and rewards results instead of just following rules.

In the eyes of visiting team members, organizational processes at study institutions frequently exhibited these qualities:

- All these processes connect and coordinate . . . one thing that the study team found was consistency (Elizabeth City State University).
- EMO [a cross-cutting unit responsible for first-year student success] collaborates with offices and departments across the campus to improve recruitment and retention initiatives (Montclair State University).

- The success of these programs for first year students is due in part to a pervasive spirit of cooperation among various offices in the Student Affairs and Academic Affairs divisions (Murray State University).
- We observed a strong sense of shared values and remarkable coordination and integration of purpose between academic affairs and student affairs . . . [with regard to units within Student Affairs] these offices have close working relationships with other offices that relate to student persistence and success (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice).
- The empowerment of staff and faculty to generate new proposals and to either implement them or bring them to the coordinating committees for funding or approval has provided the campus with the “space” to innovate and to address opportunities before they become problems (California State University Stanislaus).
- [Quoting a vice-president interviewed] . . . “It’s more than the programs . . . it’s a way of interacting collegially . . . you can find the same programs most places . . . it’s how you interact” (Northwest Missouri State University).
- There is a council on the first year that works collaboratively to integrate services . . . integration [between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs] is deep, but it is not readily described in terms of organizational structure . . . rather it is evident in the strong and consistent view of Student Affairs staff who indicated that they used two important

principles: (a) not to duplicate effort and (b) to enhance and support academic programs (Clemson University).

This level of cooperation also demands an unusual level of trust—both of top leadership and of one another. Visiting teams observed that shedding “territoriality” was much easier for unit heads and middle managements where there were clear signals through top management and the budget process that cooperative actions that saved resources, for example, would not be penalized by taking away resources. Similarly, they would not be “punished” in the resource allocation process if they revealed process weaknesses that could be improved through cooperation.

Often reinforcing these organizational habits are the distinctive ways individual roles are constructed. At many institutions, visiting teams noted that incumbents frequently take on assignments that at other institutions might well be seen as “outside my job description.” At Montclair State University, a “Faculty Think Tank” consisting of twenty faculty members drawn from across the campus review research on graduation, retention, engagement, and the student profile and develop independent action recommendations for consideration. In the words of the visiting team report, service personnel at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse “see their job as educators not service providers.” Crossover roles such as these also are promoted by physical proximity. At California State University Stanislaus, the recent addition of new building has not only provided “one-stop shopping” for student services, but also has contributed to better communication and cooperation among the many different administrators, faculty, and staff who work in it.

At some study campuses, boundary spanning has simply become part of the way the institution does business and appears to operate without a great deal of visible organization or authority. The following extracts from team reports illustrate this succinctly:

When asked how they collaborate . . . most were not conscious of doing so . . . they simply call others when they need their assistance (which is daily) if they want them to be part of a program or service or part of a planning team . . . "it's just what we do all the time" (Montclair State University).

The engagement of the faculty with students is highly integrated with other features of the university [designed to yield] high rates of retention and graduation that the university has sustained over a long period of time. This integration is deep, but it is not readily described in terms of organizational structure (Clemson University).

This structure produces policies that are not always governed by "one big idea" or centralized administrative oversight. Rather, the deeply shared commitment to the mission of the university and the understanding of administrators, staff, and faculty of the needs of their students is the integrating force (California State University Stanislaus).

But not all of what the visiting teams found about organizational processes at study campuses was consistent with the literature on organizational

effectiveness. Although role crossovers and lateral patterns of communication are pervasive at study campuses, the presence and use of management information is decidedly mixed⁷. To quote several visiting team reports:

The campus has not made a priority of developing empirical evidence about retention programs. Achievements . . . appear to be grounded in the institutional mission and culture more than in direct empirical evidence. (Elizabeth City State University).

Specific data were unavailable to attest to the impact of various features . . . the campus does not appear to be very data conscious. (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse).

[We] did not find much assessment of program effectiveness for particular programs . . . but the team found that this is an institution that takes graduation rates seriously enough for it to be part of the institution's fabric. (Murray State University).

It is evident that a particular sort of environment is being deliberately created . . . but it is also evident that this does not appear to be a data driven process at all levels of the university. (Northwest Missouri State University).

But other study campuses were both sophisticated and passionate about collecting and using information. At Truman State University, a nationally recognized assessment program is staffed almost entirely by faculty, and data are a routine part of deliberations about curriculum and strategic direction. At Clemson University, the visiting team reported that the institution has been engaged in data-driven decision-making for many years

⁷Note that this observation is one of the few that is somewhat at variance with similar studies. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) noted that information from many sources—ranging from quantitative data to stories about students—tended to inform decision-making at the campuses they studied, though they were well short of "data driven."

and access to and use of data is visible at every decision-making level. At Northwest Missouri State University, a set of “dashboard indicators” is constructed and prominently displayed for key areas of institutional functioning and is used by the institution’s leadership to create occasions for considering what could be improved. And at Murray State University, the president’s personal interest in data as evidenced by his constant use of and reference to key statistics. This has helped build a new emphasis on data based decision-making that is now being layered in on top of an already vigorous student-centered culture.

These observations suggest that information about performance may not be a necessary condition for promoting student success, so long as the requisite cultural elements are present. At the same time, the fact that information was visible and pervasive at some of the larger campuses suggests that information may prove increasingly necessary as campuses grow. And as the example of Northwest Missouri State University emphasizes, information may be as important as a symbol and an occasion for clear communication that guides decisions.

- **Enabling Leadership**—Study institutions are blessed by the presence of an unusually effective group of presidents and vice presidents. In the eyes of many visiting teams, presidential leadership tended to exhibit classic characteristics of what the literature on organizational effectiveness has come to call the “servant leader.” One of the most important of these characteristics is empowerment for decision-making throughout the institution—visibly permitting and encouraging the kind of risk-taking and assumption of responsibility for results noted as a key organizational characteristic above.

To quote several visiting team reports:

Personal responsibility and accountability and joint ownership of institutional objectives are central to the president’s leadership . . . trust was mentioned several times as a key element . . . faculty and administrators talked about the ability to have autonomy within the stated institutional goals as important to being responsive to students (University of Northern Iowa).

[The president] empowers everyone to make decisions and doesn’t take credit for even some things he should (Elizabeth City State University).

[Regarding a particular decision in the past] there was no top-down directive, no administrative fiat . . . this represented progress beyond “we-they” thinking toward a “we-we” thinking (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice).

Language used to describe the institution’s leadership was “open,” “flexible,” “trusting,” “reasonable,” “accountable,” “caring,” “accessible,” “interested,” “hard working,” and “goal oriented.” (Montclair State University).

Perhaps [the president’s] greatest achievement is to have created an atmosphere of constant assessment and improvement without creating a climate of negative judgment and criticism (Northwest Missouri State University).

The president’s leadership style encourages active problem solving, empowers staff at all levels to generate and implement solutions, and coordinates efforts through communication and

active collaboration (California State University Stanislaus).

[The new chancellor] encouraged entrepreneurship in the Physics Department, which was slated for elimination under an earlier decision . . . [with this encouragement] the department head and faculty turned it around on a student-centered model (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse).

Despite surrendering considerable day-to-day decision latitude and encouraging risk-taking, effective leaders must nevertheless set a clear sense of direction and establish visible accountability for results. At a larger institution like Clemson University, formal channels for sending this message may be needed, so the president and provost use white papers to present “big ideas” and initiate broad-based community conversations about them. At smaller campuses like Elizabeth City State University, the same job can be done by personal communication. Here the visiting team noted explicitly that the institution’s “leadership is highly unusual for the strength, clarity, and consistency of its message about student success.” Balancing decentralized empowerment with centralized vision-creation and accountability is what the role is all about. As the president of Montclair State University succinctly summarized:

It’s all about people and fostering an open-communication environment, creating community on campus, and hiring those who share an awareness of the mission. We decide very clearly and without ambiguity from the center out what needs to be done, but then give lots of freedom to act. We encourage work across boundaries and out of silos. You have the

freedom to do the work, but you will be held accountable.

As a result, the visiting team reports, “leadership at MSU is visibly multi-directional—top down, bottom up, and lateral.”

Another striking example of negotiated empowerment is provided by the regular visits that Northwest Missouri State University’s President and top management group pay to individual units to discuss performance. As the visiting team noted:

The tone of the annual visits to departments is also important . . . the aim is to recognize areas of success and to understand more fully areas in which improvement may be needed . . . We were told that an atmosphere of trust and mutual support characterizes these meetings . . . as one dean put it, “if a unit seems not to be meeting a performance objective, our question is ‘how can we help you achieve this goal?’ Another dean noted, “there’s a great tolerance for failure, but there is no tolerance for not trying.”

The budgetary process at Northwest Missouri State University similarly reflects this blend of clear communication and flexibility. Budget decisions are made collaboratively through open budget hearings attended by multiple university constituencies and there is considerable freedom for units to manage their own budgets including the ability to keep savings and carry over surpluses from year to year.

Partly as a result of these top leadership characteristics, study teams were particularly impressed with the quality and commitment of middle management and faculty leadership at many of these institutions, as the following extracts from team reports attest:

Problems and issues are recognized and solutions implemented by this empowered group [of middle management]. Faculty also seem to understand management issues and are committed to working with the administration to find mutually satisfactory solutions. Transparency in operations such as budgeting and in decision-making seems apparent and fosters trust among the various constituencies. (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice)

The study team was struck by the extent to which faculty . . . buy into campus mission [that is] repeated throughout the institution's literature and permeates campus life . . . simply put, faculty care deeply about their students and whether they succeed. They invest a great deal of personal time and energy into making that happen. (Truman State University)

An additional dimension of setting clear direction is visible follow-through from the top—for example, dedicating necessary resources to see that the job gets done. At Murray State University, the visiting team noted:

A distinctive element is the administration's strong commitment to carrying out programs once they have been developed . . . funding and positions are specifically dedicated to making programs deeper . . . it's a very deep culture created through mandatory involvement and a reward system for faculty.

Just as important, top leaders consistently and actively model the institution's espoused values, subtly encouraging others to do so as well. This active and enthusiastic participation in

communicating the institution's message about core values was one of the most striking things noticed about presidential leadership at study campuses, as the following excerpts illustrate:

The president personally models behavior that is widely observed and emulated by the campus community, such as courteously greeting untold numbers of students by name and taking every opportunity to relay the expectation of success to them (Murray State University).

The chancellor hosts a Saturday Leadership Academy open to any campus employee from housekeeping to administration. (Elizabeth City State University).

That said, it seems clear that presidential leadership is not something that can be instantly “turned on” to intervene and shape a campus culture on arrival. At many study campuses, top leaders had been in place for a long time and had been very consistent in their actions—sometimes through multiple administrations. As the team visiting Murray State University observed, “[through two Presidents], intentionality is carefully woven into the cultural fabric of the institution.” At Truman State University, the team noted that there was a very long period of stable administration to establish a learning-centered culture focused on high standards, and the new president is striving actively to perpetuate and reinforce this existing culture. Visiting team reports at the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the University of Northern Iowa, Northwest Missouri State University, and Elizabeth City State University also noted the importance of stable leadership over a long period of time.

Program Characteristics

Many studies have explored in detail the particular impacts of specific practices on retention and completion⁸. Some of the most extensive have looked at first-year experience programs, early warning and intervention systems, testing and placement programs, residence halls and cultural programming, learning communities, and service learning. The focus of the AASCU study, in contrast, was to document the more pervasive effects of culture and campus leadership within which these particular programs are deployed, coordinated, and conducted on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, visiting teams documented many examples of specific practices on these twelve campuses and these are presented in Appendix A.

The practices in many cases represented the first steps study institutions took as they evolved a student-centered culture. And in all cases, they helped reinforce such a culture once it is established. As a result, it is useful to briefly examine some of the crosscutting features that made them especially strong or distinctive.

- **Intentional**—At AASCU institutions with no visible commitment to student success, programs designed to support students are viewed principally as “services.” As such, they tend to be “delivered” to students on an as-needed basis or in response to individual needs or demands. In many cases, the student needs to ask for such support. At study institutions, visiting teams reported that faculty and staff tended to initiate action. Whether the domain is advisement, tutoring, or

first-year orientation, the faculty and staff operate intentionally and actively to determine individual student needs, to monitor progress, and to remediate problems.

One dimension on intentionality is that study institutions tend to carefully select and support the faculty and staff who are involved in student success programming. For example, not all faculty members are involved in advising and those who selected to fulfill this role appear to receive special training and support. Visiting teams also reported that many study institutions are unusual because faculty participation in advisement is formally recognized in annual reviews or through the promotion and tenure process. These features underline the importance of sound and committed academic leadership—from the academic vice president through deans and department chairs.

A second dimension is that student success programming at study institutions appears to be extremely proactive. In at least five visiting team reports the word “intrusive” was used in connection with advising—indicating the emphasis placed on proactive intervention. Particularly common here are “early warning” systems in which student progress is actively monitored and students are contacted and advised based on predicted or reported academic difficulty⁹.

A third dimension is that participation is often required. Instead of being optional, as at many campuses, orientation or freshman seminar experiences at more than half of study institutions

⁸See Astin (1975, 1977); Lenning, Beal, and Sauer (1980); Beal and Noel (1980); Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates (1985); and Tinto (1992).

⁹Research of the efficacy of “early warning” systems such as these is provided by a wide range of studies; see Tinto (1992) and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005).

tend to be mandatory for all new students. Most study campuses also require students to live on campus, where they are close to support services and academic experiences in their own residence halls. Similarly, basic skills testing involves mandatory placement to address detected weaknesses at most of these institutions. Meetings with advisors are similarly mandatory, with most campuses requiring them annually or every term for at least the first two years.

- **Integrated**—Visiting teams frequently reported that student success programs at study institutions are exceptionally well aligned with one another. Sometimes this is because they are all run under the umbrella of a single unit that is given authority to run or coordinate a wide range of related services—for example, all of those having to do with the first year of college. Montclair State University, Murray State University, Louisiana Tech University, City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Elizabeth City State University were all reported to have such a unit, with the latter delivering both academic instruction and advisement services. And in many cases, these integrated service units report to a high level of administration—for example, the provost or senior vice president.

A physical (or virtual) space where students can receive a variety of services in a single location is a characteristic that visiting team reports frequently called “one-stop shopping.” Such facilities were reported by visiting teams at California State University Stanislaus, Montclair State University, the University of Northern Iowa, and Louisiana Tech University. Team members noted that multi-purpose support locations are not only more

convenient for students, but also provide multiple opportunities for staff to communicate with one another about respective policies and individual student cases. They also observed that centrally located services provide many opportunities for staff to intervene directly with students who ask questions or are experiencing academic difficulty.

The advantages of integration reported by study campuses are many. For students, better coordination and convenience means they get consistent advice and save time. For staff, the equivalent benefits are gains in efficiency by eliminating unnecessary duplication and the opportunity to engage in common training—for example, in “customer service” skills.

- **Collaborative**—As noted earlier, a strong spirit of collaboration across unit lines is characteristic of the leadership style of many study institutions. But collaboration was seen by study teams to be equally prominent in the way these campuses run student support programs. Many services are team-based, involving membership from both academic departments and student support units. Even more widespread are committees to oversee integrated services, with members drawn from a wide array of functions. Residential campuses have a particular opportunity to engage in collaborative work through Residential College programs that combine academic and student success programming. Truman State University and Murray State University both run such programs in which selected faculty and student affairs staff members live in the residence halls.

Similarly, visiting teams reported that an unusual number of study campuses feature formally-

organized learning communities in their first year programs. Learning communities are directly collaborative for students, who often preserve bonds fostered in them beyond the first year of study¹⁰. Like those established elsewhere, learning communities at study campuses are frequently staffed by teams comprised of faculty, student affairs staff members, librarians, and upper-class peer mentors. Indeed, the prominent use of peer-mentors in various roles is an especially striking collaborative feature of student success programs at study institutions. Teams reported that Elizabeth City State University, Virginia State University, Montclair State University, and City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice use peer mentors in their first year programs and at Northwest Missouri State University, consistent with the institution's unusually heavy reliance on student workers, most aspects of the freshman seminar and its accompanying Summer Orientation program are staffed by students.

- **Academic**—A final aspect of student support at study institutions reported by visiting teams is that it is integral to the teaching and learning process. In contrast to many campuses where “student affairs” is a world apart, added on to the academic core in an attempt to make up for its lack of engagement, the classroom and curriculum appear to be integral parts of student success programming at these institutions. A key aspect of this is that faculty members are directly involved. Visiting teams reported frequently that faculty take advising seriously and are held accountable for it. They also tend to be directly involved in such

initiatives as residential college programs, learning communities, and first year experience programs. But most of all, visiting teams pointed out that the faculty role is not confined to instruction and formal programming, but is visible in regular and sincere out-of-class contact with students and in engaging, interactive teaching strategies.

Deliberately engineered curricular features intended to facilitate student progress also appear to be prominent at study institutions. Many of these are aimed at simplifying the structure of course requirements or ensuring that key courses are available so that students can graduate on time. Flexible scheduling and alternative ways to earn credit are similar examples of curricular features that remove barriers and make academic progress easier. Ensuring that sufficient numbers of courses are available each term to enable students to make steady progress without being blocked by closed classes also helps smooth student progress. But it is important to emphasize that as they employ such strategies to ease student progress, visiting teams simultaneously observed that curricula do not compromise standards. Indeed, consistent with the theme of high expectations, a clear focus on maintaining academic standards—and the message that an emphasis on high standards sends—helps motivate students and reinforces faculty perceptions that “increased retention” will not come at the expense of learning.

All of these features call attention to the key role of the institution's chief academic officer in motivating and rewarding faculty for their actions to increase student success. At Clemson University, the visiting team noted the provost's sensitivity to the different kinds of contributions different

¹⁰For comprehensive evidence of the effectiveness of learning communities in promoting student success, see Smith, McGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004).

faculty could make in this regard, and structuring a reward system that could enable faculty to pursue different career trajectories.

Finally, visiting teams observed that these campuses are unusually committed to monitoring and improving student engagement—illustrated by how many of them regularly employ the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Some (Truman State University, Clemson University, and University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) have visible undergraduate research programs that help develop academic self-directedness and motivation while they multiply opportunities for relevant contact with faculty. Others (City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice and University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) emphasize real-world connections through internships, field placement, and service learning opportunities. Still others (Murray State University and California State University Stanislaus) achieve similar ends by devoting unusual attention to curricular coherence so that students see a clear rationale for the courses they are taking. Many similar teaching and learning practices employed by study campuses could be mentioned. But as many teams observed, what is important about them is less their specifics than the fact that student success is seen as a critical academic responsibility.

Visiting team reports provide detailed examples of many other specific practices engaged in by particular study institutions. But it is important to emphasize that although these practices may indeed be effective individually and instrumentally, the real thrust of what visiting teams found is how intentionally they are deployed as part of a

larger strategy for student success, which is in turn embedded in a pervasive institutional culture. Indeed, study teams especially noted the ways institutions were able to build on “islands” of success to extend them into more comprehensive efforts and to take institutional consciousness about student success programming to the next level¹¹.

Visiting team reports also emphasized the importance of building an array of intentional integrated programming over time. Most of these campuses have been at this business for quite a while—often, in the words of the visiting teams “from the mid-1970s” or “as long as anybody could remember.” This is not to say that new presidents arriving at a campus with none of these features in place will by definition be ineffective in improving current retention and completion rates. But it does emphasize the need to start with a clear collective vision and work steadily over the long haul to make it a reality. As the Montclair State University visiting team concluded, “reaching high standards requires persistence over many years and willingness to continually scan the horizon for best practices that can be adapted, with care, to particular institutional contexts and cultures.” The Northwest Missouri State University visiting team summarized the reasons for that campus’ success in a similar vein: “a bias toward action, a tendency to stick with initiatives long enough for them to develop, and a tolerance for creativity in management yield remarkable results . . . constant fostering of a positive ‘can do’ atmosphere seems to have a multiplier effect.”

¹¹This is consistent with the way Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) describe the evolution of programming at the 20 high-performing institutions they studied

Advantages of Policy and Place

Visiting team reports for the twelve campuses were unanimous in their perceptions that they were unusual in their dedication to students and in their effectiveness in retaining and graduating them. As a caveat to this perception, many also noted that study campuses had some clear advantages that helped explain their high performances. Some of these advantages were natural, resulting from specific physical or programmatic circumstances. Others were the result of deliberate policy. But to enable readers to make their own judgments about the range of applicability of these findings, it is important to briefly list them.

- **Selectivity**—Like many AASCU institutions, a number of study campuses had raised their admissions requirements. As a result, both institutional representatives and visiting team members attributed part of the success of the institutions increasing graduation rates to having better students to begin with. This is consistent with national studies that indicate the single biggest predictor of an institution's graduation rate is the preparation level of its students. Reports on Virginia State University, Louisiana Tech University, Northwest Missouri State University, and Murray State University all explicitly mentioned this factor (although the Northwest Missouri visiting team concluded that it had not had much empirical effect). In addition, reports on Truman State University, the University of Northern Iowa, and Clemson University acknowledged that admissions policies had been selective for some time. Reports from the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse noted that they were receiving better-

prepared students than in the past, in part because of the kinds of programs the institutions offer.

- **Homogeneity**—Visiting team reports sometimes noted the advantages for retention and student success of having a homogenous student body—one comprised of students with similar backgrounds and aspirations. Not surprisingly, this was noted as a particular factor for both of the HBCUs participating in the study. But homogeneity of background among students also was noted as a factor at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and the University of Northern Iowa, which are campuses without much diversity. But homogeneity as a factor also could be programmatic or “extracurricular.” City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse feature unusual concentrations of students in particular professional programs—uniformed fire and police services in the first case, and health professions in the second. The staff at Clemson University see themselves as particularly advantaged with respect to retention because 35–40 percent of the student body are “legacies” with unusual loyalty to the institution. They also point to the university's origins as a military institution noting, “the principles of military service are part of Clemson's fabric.” Similarly, students at the University of Northern Iowa appear blessed by an unusual motivation to succeed. Quoting the visiting team report, “beyond the academic profile of the students is a deep-seated respect and value for the importance of education to one's life . . . to Iowa students, college is an important job.”
- **Limited Size**—In addition to selectivity, the research literature on student retention always

has noted small institutional size as a correlate and campuses participating in the study are indeed, on average, smaller than is typical for an AASCU institution. Visiting team reports explicitly mentioned overall campus size as a factor in retention for Elizabeth City State University, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and the University of Northern Iowa. At Northwest Missouri State University, the visiting team noted that the institution has deliberately chosen to limit its enrollment in order to preserve its current character. Reports for Truman State University, Murray State University, California State University Stanislaus, and University of Northern Iowa further mentioned the effect of small classes—maintained either by policy or because of the physical constraints of the campus.

- **Physical Isolation or Configuration—**

Finally, several visiting team reports noted additional features of some study campuses that helped foster student identification and persistence independent of any deliberate programming. At Elizabeth City State University, the team observed that the largely non-welcoming neighboring environment for this HBCU forced students and faculty to create a strong alternative “inner community.” The team also observed that Elizabeth City’s “mostly isolated, rural location” was a factor in building a viable on-campus

community. This was a factor noted by visiting teams at Louisiana Tech University and Truman State University—though the latter’s visiting team simultaneously noted rural isolation as a potentially negative retention factor for this institution’s relatively sophisticated suburban student population. Both isolation and the physical beauty of the surrounding area were noted as advantages by the team visiting University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. But some teams saw campuses as naturally advantaged for opposite reasons. The visiting team at the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice observed, “it was surprising that the physical setting [in downtown New York City], which would ordinarily be seen as a negative, seemed to be contributing to a sense of community because it forced the students to turn inward for a sense of connection . . . the lack of facilities has had a positive impact in that all members of the campus community are constantly encountering one another in the halls and stairwells.”

None of these natural advantages can be seen as decisive. Indeed, many study group campuses that lacked them did just as well in retaining and graduating students at higher-than-average rates. Conversely, many AASCU institutions that share these features do not perform nearly as well. But they should be noted as part of the overall picture in assessing the reasons for distinctive success.

What Presidents Can Do

We know from decades of retention research that student success in college is partly a matter of “nature” and partly of “nurture.” The “nature” of the students enrolling at our institutions—as embodied in characteristics like demographics, income and, above all, academic aptitude and ability—have a very strong effect on their chances of graduating. In parallel the “nurture” we provide them through strong and effective student support programs also will affect their chances, whatever their entering characteristics and abilities.

University leaders have a fundamental choice to make if they want to increase graduation rates. On the one hand, they can take the traditional path of increasing selectivity—an option that likely will lead automatically to higher graduation rates. Taking this path will admittedly enhance the institution’s prestige and reputation on the outside, just as it will likely sell well with faculty on the inside. But it does not embody exemplary leadership for an AASCU institution. On the contrary, it represents an abrogation of the fundamental social responsibility these institutions were created to meet. We will not succeed as a nation by ramping up the competition that decides which institutions the top third of our high school graduates get to attend. We can only

raise overall attainment levels by building a higher education system in which far greater proportions of average students will earn degrees. The more courageous and difficult choice, which study institutions illustrate (though some have increased selectivity as well), is to succeed with the students we have.

So what can presidents do? The powerful effects on student success at study institutions of campus culture and aligned programs are both impressive and daunting for those who seek to emulate them. On the one hand, as classic “existence proofs,” these campuses demonstrate that high levels of persistence and completion can indeed be achieved by AASCU institutions. There are few reasons to believe, given enough time and the proper circumstances, that far more AASCU institutions could reach these levels. But that’s the rub. Simply explaining success in terms like “it’s in the water” or “it’s just how we do things around here” doesn’t give sitting presidents at campuses that don’t have such cultures and practices a lot of help in deciding what to do to get started.

Clearly, the single most important lesson these cases reinforce is the importance of institutional culture in shaping the day-to-day behavior of faculty and

staff in their interactions with students¹². And it's consistent behavior that builds retention—in the words of one visiting team report, “one student at a time.” This certainly does not imply that institutions should pay scant attention to designing and implementing programs like first-year experiences, “early warning” systems, “intrusive” advisement, and the many curricular features described in this report. But it does suggest that simply putting “best practice” programs like these into place is unlikely to have a dramatic effect. This is the first, and the most important thing that presidents need to understand. Beyond this fundamental recognition presidents can take a number of practical steps to begin building a student-centered culture, whatever their current starting point.

Articulate a Collective Vision

University presidents can rarely dictate behavior. But they can alter the way people look at their own institution. Presidents can therefore raise a topic like building a student success-oriented culture, and keep people talking about it long enough for a shared sense of ownership and understanding to evolve¹³. There are many ways to start such a conversation. Some may begin with external data—for example, choosing a set of ten to twelve peer institutions using the EdTrust web tool, and asking campus teams to benchmark the performance of their own institution with respect to retention/completion against them. Others may begin by systematically examining

their own interactions with students. Still others might undertake a collective “visioning” exercise to brainstorm about the practices and earmarks that would characterize the ideal “student-centered” institution. No matter which of these starting points is chosen, the key to making the process work is to be as concrete and as collective as possible.

Concreteness demands considerable specificity and detail in describing the vision's particulars. One aid to getting there is to ask a series of focused questions to build an integrated scenario. If a student-centered culture were in place, what would an encounter between a student and a service office actually look like? How would faculty behave when they encountered students informally on campus or in the community? How would the institution handle student complaints? How would it know that students are in trouble? How would students spend their time? What would the campus look like physically? Questions like these force people to get beyond just describing the structural features of student success programs. It forces them instead to articulate the specifics of human interaction and behavior that really make them work.

Collectivity demands that members of the campus community create this vision together and step beyond the straightforward “form a committee” approach to most campus action planning in at least two ways. First, sufficient numbers should be involved that the resulting ideas are seen not as “somebody's” ideas but our ideas. One approach used by study institutions was to organize a number of large visioning events involving a wide cross-section of campus roles, ideally held in a “retreat” setting. Other campuses have used a more iterative approach in which a number of working groups

¹²The preeminent importance of a student-centered culture in promoting student learning and development has been extensively documented by previous research, see Chickering (1969); Astin (1975, 1977, 1985); Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates (1980); Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991); and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005).

¹³Some researchers have noted the importance of creating a distinctive language to describe the institution's student-oriented philosophy, see Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005, p.298).

operate in parallel on the same vision, refining it through mutual exchange in a yearlong process. Second, any groups formed to help take these initial steps should emphatically not represent constituencies. There should be no “faculty,” “student life,” or “line worker” positions articulated. The initial emphasis instead should be placed on what everybody wants to see happen to students.

Take Stock

Visioning provides the basis for taking stock of the current situation, which is the next needed step. As in visioning, there are many ways to approach this task. A first is to conduct a formal “audit” of current practices using a protocol of self-directed questions¹⁴. But there are other less formal, but nevertheless useful, ways to assess current conditions. One is to appoint a study team to systematically map out all the institution’s current programs that affect student success—admissions, orientation, registration, financial aid, advisement, etc.—to document such things as lines of responsibility and reporting, overlapping or duplicative areas, costs, populations covered, and data on effectiveness. The behavioral counterpart to mapping is to ask members of the study team to actually “walk the process” by taking every step a student would take in, say, registering for an appropriate schedule next term. This will almost always uncover areas where actual practice deviates from written policy. Together, the results of the mapping process and behavioral investigation

will immediately suggest areas that can be improved programmatically. More importantly, they will help determine how much needs to be done to shift the existing culture.

A stocktaking exercise will have three outcomes. First, it might reveal a healthy, student-centered culture comparable to some of those described in this report. While certainly cause for celebration, this outcome doesn’t mean that no further action should be taken. The history of many institutions has demonstrated that cultures are fragile and need to be consciously sustained. And as many study campuses illustrate, the conviction that there is always something to be done better is one of the best ways to maintain them.

Second, and most likely, taking stock will reveal pockets of success in relatively unconnected programs or initiatives. A primary action focus will be to link these proven initiatives as part of a larger strategy of student success. As illustrated by the experiences of many study institutions, presidents should consider assigning overall responsibility for student success programs to a single organizational entity reporting directly to the vice-president for academic affairs. Alternatively, an integrated committee structure should be considered.

Finally, taking stock may reveal a campus culture that does not fundamentally value graduation as a goal. A first step should be to develop compelling data and arguments for increasing student success. Some of these arguments might demonstrate the limits of simply competing for better students, given the cost of recruitment and institutional aid and the projected distribution of high school graduates. Others might demonstrate the financial payoffs of

¹⁴Institutions wishing to conduct a formal “audit” of this kind have many tools available. As part of the “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” the authors developed a simple but useful “institutional inventory” for colleges and universities to assess their own practices, Chickering, Gamson, and Barsi (1989). Another protocol for assessing “involving colleges” was developed by Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991). Finally, the DEEP project has developed a comprehensive guide to assessing institutional practices that promote student engagement and success, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (in press).

improving institutional persistence and graduation rates.

Act Strategically

Perhaps the most typical institutional response to a detected need or problem in any area is to add a new program or activity to address it. The resulting “additive bias” affects many areas of college and university life, but perhaps most of all programming directed at retention and student success. New initiatives are frequently layered in on top of existing ones and little thought is given to stopping old activities when newer (and frequently more “fashionable”) initiatives with overlapping objectives are launched. This again suggests the efficacy of carefully mapping existing program responsibilities and clienteles to identify overlaps and gaps, as well as considering more integrative coordination and oversight structures. By adopting an action strategy based on special purpose “programs” can send an unintended message that only those directly involved in them are responsible for student success. Ironically and unintentionally, this perspective may actually discourage widespread internalization of this responsibility through a student-centered culture.

Acting strategically means that institutional leaders must ask at least two questions explicitly about any proposed new program or activity before it is considered. The first is how the initiative helps the institution build or reinforce the wider culture of student success. This may mean leading with pedagogical initiatives like collaborative learning or service learning that have an immediate impact on people’s behavior¹⁵. Interacting in new ways, albeit in relatively limited settings, concretely models

for students, faculty, and staff key attributes of the intended broader culture. The second question that leaders must ask is how the proposed initiative will position the institution to take the next step. The use of upper-division peer mentors in a typical Freshman Orientation week, for example, can be deliberately structured to work toward their employment in an anticipated full-year first-year experience program. The key in both cases is to think of each programmatic initiative not as a “fix” to a particular retention problem, but as a deliberate action step toward a strategic direction.

Another aspect of acting strategically is to build an information infrastructure capable of simultaneously monitoring progress and providing detailed feedback about what is working for which student populations. While many study campuses were able to gradually evolve a culture of student success without developing a visible “culture of evidence,” building such a culture intentionally requires attention to data. Many missions and strategic plans fail to mobilize campuses largely because the visions they proclaim are sufficiently unfocused thereby meaning different things to different people. Developing indicators that describe “success” more explicitly can expose hidden ambiguities and clarify action requirements. Indicators can also be used to publicly monitor progress and be referenced by leaders to both deal with problems and celebrate success. At a different level, the information infrastructure must be capable of providing faculty and staff with disaggregated analyses about what kinds of interventions are working for what kinds of students. Above all, this requires a longitudinal database capability that can track students from

¹⁵This strategy is suggested by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005, p.302-3).

point of entry, through each programmatic encounter and class, until they graduate¹⁶.

Invest in the Culture

The stories of many study campuses appear so natural and ineffable that it is tempting for observers to conclude that culture is immutable. But there are many examples of institutions that once had such a culture and lost it. A handful of institutions may have evolved and internalized robust systems of values and behaviors that are relentlessly focused on student success. But for most campuses, presidents must actively invest in the culture to nurture and reinforce it after it is built. Faculty and staff recruitment processes are especially critical for accomplishing this. At most institutions, individual units—academic departments and service units—are responsible for creating position descriptions, examining applications, and interviewing candidates. In contrast, institutions that wish to sustain a student-centered culture need to consider recruiting every new incumbent strategically—in just the same way they consider new programs or initiatives. While appropriate decentralization in recruitment should certainly be maintained, presidents can insist that all position descriptions and recruitment materials prominently reference a central focus on undergraduate learning and student success. Candidates also can be asked to demonstrate student-oriented commitments and skills when they visit the campus by, for example, preparing an annotated syllabus for an undergraduate class, submitting a teaching portfolio, and conducting an undergraduate seminar in addition to the standard “dissertation research presentation.” Presidents

also can selectively, but visibly, participate in the interview process for key faculty and staff positions.

After a new hire institutions need to pay careful attention to socializing new faculty as members of a student-centered community. New faculty, for example, cannot be assumed to know what they need to know about the general education curriculum, how students can get help if they are in academic difficulty, or even how to conduct an effective collaborative class. Two effective approaches in this regard that presidents can advocate and monitor are new faculty orientation processes and senior faculty mentorship. Orientation can occur in many ways, but is probably most effectively implemented in partnership with the academic departments where new faculty will make their homes and a campus teaching/learning center. The use of senior faculty mentors, in turn, requires a careful balance between collegial support and challenge. The best examples may involve mentors visiting new faculty classrooms periodically during the first year of teaching, and should certainly involve informal, but scheduled, meetings during this period.

Finally, sustaining a student-centered teaching-learning culture demands a robust organizational infrastructure and visible symbols or rituals. The infrastructure needs a center for teaching and learning that can provide faculty with resources and services to support their own pedagogy, and a mechanism to coordinate student academic support services—especially in the first year of college. Information resources such as a sophisticated longitudinal student tracking capability are also critical elements of this infrastructure. While the details will vary from campus to campus, presidents need to act visibly and promptly to create such

¹⁶A good place to start in creating such a database—focused explicitly on the critical first year in college—is Paulson (2003).

resources and ensure that they remain supported, even in tough budget years.

Just as important for sustaining a culture, though, are symbols and rituals. All campuses have the former—slogans, mascots, images—often associated with success in athletic competition. Previous work, as well as the experiences of study campuses, makes it clear that carefully chosen symbols and rituals can be similarly captured to promote student success¹⁷. Presidents also are in an especially powerful position to provide individual recognition and opportunities for collective celebration. Conferring teaching or exemplary service awards, for example, or attaining retention and academic outcomes targets can be occasions to reinforce core cultural messages. Rituals like graduation ceremonies also should be harnessed for their cultural potential by ensuring that faculty visibly attend and, perhaps, a “rite of passage” created for students at early stages of their academic career like completing the first year of college. Presidents should always remember that academic communities—both individually and in the scholarly enterprise as a whole—often value recognition as much as monetary reward, and should consciously use this potential to shape collective behavior.

Walk the Talk

As these last examples suggest, presidents should above all recognize that their own personal rhetoric and behavior are among the most powerful influence on campus culture. The presidential role as chief executive can ensure that structures are put in place, the right people are recruited and rewarded, and sufficient financial resources are allocated to student

success efforts. But the nature of the presidency in the decentralized, participatory milieu of the academy means that the most powerful dimension of presidential influence is symbolic.

As a result, presidents seeking to build or sustain a campus culture centered on student success need to regularly “look in the mirror” to examine their own day-to-day behavior. Questions that they should ask themselves might include: “How many times do I mention student success in formal addresses and informal conversations?”, “Do I visibly and publicly recognize members of the campus community for contributions to student success?”, “Do I create structures of shared responsibility that cut across organizational lines and encourage people to work together on this?”, “How do people know that I really care about student success?”, and “How do I know they are listening when I talk about student success?”¹⁸

Presidents need to remember that they are most effective when they can both shape and use the culture to send consistent messages and when they can make visible strategic decisions and investments to sustain it. Among the most powerful are actions to support student success programming in hard times, when it is tempting to cut such programs and concentrate only on protecting the academic core. Opportunities to send such messages are admittedly unpredictable, but presidents need to carefully watch for them and take advantage of them when they arise. And they should always remember that the symbolic, cultural dimensions of a presidential decision are just as important as its direct operational consequences.

¹⁷Note the examples described in Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005, pp. 119-23, 190-91, 244).

¹⁸For a more extensive guide to the kinds of questions presidents should ask themselves, see Kuh (2005).

Conclusion

The experiences of study campuses illustrate the considerable diversity of institutions that have achieved unusual success in retaining and graduating students. This very variety makes two important points. First, success in this arena can happen anywhere. It is not just the province of small, academically selective institutions where students are likely to graduate anyway. There is no reason why, with the proper combination of leadership, strategic programming, and persistent consistency in decision-making that such success cannot be achieved at any AASCU campus.

Second, there is no one “magic bullet” that guarantees success. Simply finding what appears to be a “best practice” combination of programming and “plugging it in” on campus is unlikely to be sufficient. Success instead means carefully reading the current campus culture, aligning people and programs, and making a collective commitment to be in it for the long haul. And sound presidential leadership is where all of this begins.

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Appendix A

Specific Practices

Visiting team reports contain many rich descriptions of individual student success programs found on study campuses. This appendix only reviews some of their highlights, grouped by type of program. Readers are urged to consult the individual visiting team reports for the details of the programs highlighted at aascu.org.

- **First-Year Experience Programs**—All twelve study campuses had implemented freshman or new student intake programs intended to smooth the transition to college life. These programs have multiple goals including providing information on campus services and how to access them, strengthening planning and study skills, basic skills development, and curricular orientation. Some incorporate other proven “good practices” for student success such as learning communities, peer mentorship, or service learning. They range in scope and intensity from full-year programs to orientations of a few weeks in length. In general, though, the programs offered by study campuses appeared more extensive, intentional, and intensive than those typical of other AASCU campuses.

The use of upper-class peer mentors appears to be an especially prevalent feature of many of these programs. At Elizabeth City State University, mentors participate in freshman seminars so

that new students can immediately establish relationships with students who are successful members of the community. At Virginia State University and City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, peer mentor positions are often given to Honors students. At Northwest Missouri, consistent with the institution’s unusually heavy reliance on student workers, most aspects of the Freshman Seminar program and its accompanying Summer Orientation program are staffed by students. And at Montclair State University, “First Year Peer Leaders” are relied upon to expand new student opportunities in the community as well as modeling behaviors and providing academic support.

Another feature in common across many of these programs is that they are required. At Murray State University the visiting team noted of the program’s service component, “Freshman do not have the option to decide whether or not to participate... students who receive merit scholarships are still required to perform five hours of service.” At California State University Stanislaus, participation is required as a result of a California State University system initiative and students are pre-scheduled to ensure that enough classes and places will be available. Among residential campuses, Louisiana Tech University, University

of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Northwest Missouri State University, Truman State University, and Clemson University all require students to live on campus during their first year.

Finally, some of these programs contained distinctive features that visiting teams commented on. At Elizabeth City State University the freshman seminar is preceded by a summer reading program for new students. At Murray State University first year seminars are planned and implemented by individual academic departments to socialize new students into the discipline if they have already decided on a major. At California State University Stanislaus and Montclair State University, the First Year program includes learning communities.

- **“Intentional” Advising**—Study campuses, like AASCU institutions nationwide, employ a considerable variety of advising models. Some use professional advisors to provide all advising. Others confine the use of professionals to students who have not yet declared a major. Still others use only faculty members as advisors. Similarly, study campuses varied greatly in the scope of their advising programs—ranging from “full service” counseling in addition to traditional academic advising to limiting the advisor role to curriculum planning and monitoring progress. What study campuses had in common, though, was the intentionality and intensiveness of their admittedly varying approaches to advising.

A first element of intentionality concerns those who do advising. Many study institutions showed unusual attention to the selection, training, evaluation, and reward of advisors. At Elizabeth

City State University, as the visiting team reported, “not everybody can be an advisor.” Advisors are selected for their personal characteristics and all advisors must complete mandatory training. Also an “advising log” is required. At Louisiana Tech University, that primarily employs faculty as advisors, the evaluation of advisement is a formal part of each faculty member’s annual review. At Clemson University similar reviews of faculty advising are taken into account in promotion and tenure decisions (though reports vary on how consistently this is enacted across departments). At Truman State University advising is incorporated into the Residential College program where full-time advisors are located in each Hall and resident faculty participate in academic programming for the Hall.

Second, advising is in most cases mandatory. At California State University Stanislaus departments require students to meet with their advisors every term. At Montclair State University and Clemson University all undeclared students are required to work with staff from a special orientation unit throughout their first year of college. At City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice all students who have completed less than thirty credits are blocked from registering for classes until an advisor removes the stop, thus ensuring that students actually meet with advisors. This same requirement tends to carry over into basic skills assessment. Consistent with City University of New York policy, all students at John Jay College of Criminal Justice must take systemwide basic skills and placement test. And at Montclair State University placement based on skills test performance requires students to remediate shortfalls within their first year of study.

In addition to being mandatory, advising is in many cases active, with advisors taking the initiative rather than waiting for students to come to them. In at least five visiting team reports, the word “intrusive” was used in connection with advising—indicating the emphasis on intervention in advising at these campuses. Particularly common are so-called “early warning systems” in which students are identified quickly if they are in academic difficulty and then placed into appropriate skills-development or tutoring situations. Again, these approaches take many forms. At University of Wisconsin-La Crosse residence hall directors receive mid-term grade and intervene for students receiving Ds or Fs. At the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice the Registrar’s office sends special emails to relevant offices regarding students who are in academic difficulty. At Clemson University students in academic jeopardy receive an early warning at mid-term and advisors are notified to contact advisees and set up a face-to-face meeting. At the University of Northern Iowa students are identified as “at risk” up front on the basis of entering characteristics. Special services are provided to them and they are tracked through an early warning system. At Truman State University students on academic probation sign a contract that spells out what they need to do and are required to see their advisors weekly. And at Northwest Missouri State University all entering students participate in a spring orientation that involves pre-registration in all fall classes according to guidelines that prior research suggests will work best for them individually, given their specific characteristics. As a result, the visiting team reports, “before they enroll, students already feel as though they are students at Northwest.”

A third and final element of “intrusive advising” at study institutions is that it often has a prominent information component. An “academic progress report” at Murray State University, for instance, enables students to promptly check their progress toward completing degrees in multiple programs. Similar “degree audit” systems were reported at many other study campuses.

- **Integrated Services**—Related to intentionality, another feature that visiting teams frequently found was coordinated or integrated services for students. Part of this is administrative, where a single unit is given authority to run or coordinate a wide range of services—for example all of those having to do with the first year of college. Part of it is physical; where students can access all the services they need at a single location. As noted earlier, both of these features can help reinforce the lateral communications dimension of campus culture that seems so important to promoting student success.

Visiting teams found a variety of different models for integrated service units at study campuses. Montclair State University operates an Enrollment Management Office to coordinate all services related to student retention and completion. Murray State University has established a similar office, entitled the Office of Retention. At Louisiana Tech University, Student Affairs was recently restructured (after a consultation with Noel Levitz) to create a single Director of Advising and Retention, as well as better definition and coordination of key staff roles. And at Elizabeth City State University, a single Department of General Studies provides the curriculum and all advisement services for the first two years of

enrollment. The City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice has a similar unit called “Freshman Services” that reports to the Provost. But not every campus that has integrated its services does so through a single administrative unit. At Clemson University an overlapping committee structure plays the same role as a “unit” in coordinating the University’s enrollment management initiative.

Just as common appear to be physical (or virtual) spaces where students can experience “one-stop shopping” to obtain needed services. At California State University Stanislaus a new building was constructed specifically to house retention-related services. Similarly, the Student Academic Services office, in which all academic counseling services at Montclair State University were recently aggregated, was recently relocated to a single accessible location. The University of Northern Iowa and Louisiana Tech University are following similar approaches. At the latter, a planned Student Success Center will be the centerpiece of the campus’ “Quality Enhancement Plan,” required for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) under its new guidelines.

Residential study campuses have a particular opportunity to centralize and coordinate services through the residence halls where students are already congregated. Truman State University and Murray State University have formal Residential College programs that combine academic and student success programming. But such programs also serve to create greater identification with the campus for new students. The visiting team report from University of Wisconsin-La Crosse specifically noted the role of residence halls in

building a sense of “belongingness” for new students. And at Murray State University each of the eight Residential Colleges has a banner to symbolically heighten student identification.

- **Curricular Features**—Finally, instead of just “offering courses,” many study campuses have created specific curricular features that are consciously designed to build greater student identification and engagement. The residential college programs are good examples of deliberate programming. But intentional curricular features appear even more important at institutions where the majority of students are commuters and where the only place to reach them may be the classroom.

Many curricular policies noted by visiting teams involve the same balance between student empowerment and “intrusive intervention” noted in discussions of culture and service delivery. The City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice offers a curriculum that features flexible scheduling and a range of instructional delivery formats. But it also has policies that strictly limit the number of courses that students can register for if they are in academic difficulty.

Other policies appear aimed at simplifying the curriculum so that students can graduate promptly. Louisiana Tech University has a compressed academic calendar that enables students to progress toward their academic goals quickly through ten-week quarters that earn semester credits. Using a different approach, Montclair State University recently reduced the numbers of credits needed to graduate and has moved aggressively to ensure that sufficient course sections are available each term so that students

can graduate on time. Clemson University recently undertook an initiative to “clean its curricular closet,” producing a curriculum of manageable size that students can navigate quickly and effectively. Northwest Missouri State University’s curriculum has similar features. As the visiting team reported, “The net effect of flexibility in the general education curriculum and the streamlined major curriculum, along with facility in using courses taken as electives, is to smooth students’ paths to graduation.”

Additional curricular initiatives or policies try to achieve similar ends by ensuring that students do not lose credits in transitions. At the University of Northern Iowa, special attention is given to make sure that students do not lose credit if they change majors and the curriculum includes an “accelerate” feature that employs CLEP and other challenge tests that allow students to graduate early. And at Clemson University, much advising is directed toward “getting students into the right majors” quickly so they can take the required coursework. The visiting team report contrasts this approach to “some universities’ philosophy of the ‘inquiring learner’” that may involve many semesters before entering a major with consequent student perceptions of irrelevance for general education work.

Finally, a number of curricular features are designed to engage students in academic work and motivate them to continue. Truman State University, Clemson University, and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse all have strong undergraduate research programs in which students work directly with faculty members in faculty labs or offices to pursue independent research and support faculty research. These

programs feature internal grant funding and conferences where students publicly present the results of their work. At Clemson University the visiting team reports that this feature contributes to the university’s intended image as a “student-centered research university.”

Curricula at other study campuses incorporate features that link coursework together programmatically, so that students see a clear rationale for the courses they are taking. At Murray State University, the University Studies (general education) program requires core courses for all students that include an intended outcomes statement explaining to students the value of the skills learned in these courses for future life and study. Similarly, California State University Stanislaus has a “Summit” program that intentionally links courses longitudinally to provide integration across terms and to provide learning community opportunities for transfer students.

Finally, other curricular features at study campuses emphasize “real world” connections—again demonstrating relevance and helping to increase student motivation. At the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice an internship program allows students to experience directly what happens in the profession that they are preparing for and students can take up to five internships for a total of 15 credits. Similarly, at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse where community linkages are seen as a key to student identification and success, some 83 percent of students have participated in a practicum, field experience, or clinical assignment.

Appendix B

Individuals Involved in the Graduation Rate Study

Graduation Rate Outcomes Study Commissioners

- Sally Clausen, President, University of Louisiana System
- Jerry B. Farley, President, Washburn University, Kansas
- Judy Hample, Chancellor, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education
- Ray Hoops, President, University of Southern Indiana
- Thomas C. Meredith, Commissioner of Higher Education, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning
- James H. McCormick, Chancellor, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
- Richard L. Pattenau, President, University of Southern Maine
- Charles B. Reed, Chancellor, California State University

Graduation Rate Outcomes Study Project Staff

- John M. Hammang, Director of Special Projects, AASCU and Study Project Manager
- George Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change, AASCU
- Janis Somerville, NASH Senior Associate
- Peter Ewell (Consultant) Vice President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

Study Campuses

California State University Stanislaus

- Marvalene Hughes, President, Dillard University, Louisiana and President Emerita, California State University Stanislaus
- Primary Contact: Stacey Morgan-Foster, Vice President for Student Affairs

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: minority serving—traditionally high rates

Clemson University

- James Barker, President
- Primary Contact: Catherine Watt, Director of Institutional Research and Planning

Carnegie Class: Doctoral-Research; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: traditionally high rates

City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice

- Jeremy Travis, President
- Primary Contact: Rubie Malone, Director of Strategic Planning and Assessment

Carnegie Class: Specialized; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: minority serving-improved rates

Elizabeth City State University

- Mickey Burnim, Chancellor
- Primary Contact: Bonita Ewers, Acting Provost

Carnegie Class: Baccalaureate; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Less Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: minority serving—traditionally high rates

Louisiana Tech University

- Daniel Reneau, President
- Primary Contact: Pamela Ford, Dean of Enrollment Management

Carnegie Class: Doctoral-Research; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: improved rates

Montclair State University

- Susan Cole, President
- Primary Contact: Richard Lynde, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: traditionally high rates

Murray State University

- F. King Alexander, President
- Primary Contact: King Alexander, President

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: improved rates

Northwest Missouri State University

- Dean Hubbard, President
- Primary Contact: Dean Hubbard, President

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Less Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: improved rates

Truman State University

- Barbara Dixon, President
- Primary Contact: Michael McManis, Dean for Planning and Institutional Development

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Very Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: traditionally high rates

University of Northern Iowa

- Robert Koob, President
- Primary Contact: Aaron Podolefsky, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: traditionally high rates

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

- Douglas Hastad, Chancellor
- Primary Contact: Elizabeth Hitch, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Carnegie Class: Masters I; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Very Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: improved rates

Virginia State University

- Eddie Moore, President
- Primary Contact: Eric Thomas, Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs

Carnegie Class: Doctoral-Research; Barrons Admission
Selectivity: Competitive
Study reason for inclusion: minority serving-improved rates

Study Team Members by Study Campus:

California State University Stanislaus

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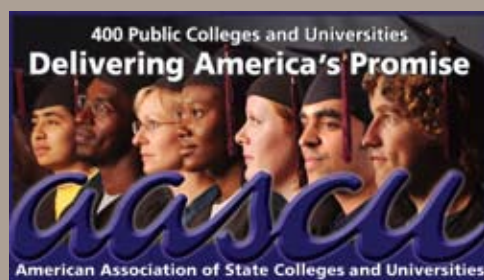
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